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ABSTRACT

Prereading activities, analogous to prewriting activities, can draw on the reader's prior knowledge of the subject and make the student's reading of literature more proficient, raise the comprehension level, and make class discussions more meaningful. Some suggested prereading activities for the literature classroom include (1) making students aware of text structure; (2) working on the vocabulary they will encounter; (3) presenting some information on possibly confusing actions, characters, or setting; (4) commenting on key words, images, or themes; (5) reading aloud to students to give them a sense of the sound and flow of the language; and (6) helping them anticipate what will happen in a reading assignment. Any of this type of prior preparation enables students to have a more successful reading experience. (A guideline for preparing a preview of a reading assignment is attached.) (RS)

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THE NEED FOR PRE-READING INSTRUCTION

JEAN BAUSO

When I took Freshman Composition in 1964, we discussed Salinger and Joyce in class, and we wrote numerous essays with directions like "Write an interesting essay on...," "Write a clear essay in which you compare and contrast...," "Write a critical analysis of..." But not once in the semester was anything said about how to write those essays. I would settle into the library, laboring to reproduce the kinds of insightful points that had been made in class discussions of the texts, and the comment on my paper usually began, "Intelligent and interesting." Then came the "But," which was followed by a paragraph lamenting the absence of organization and coherent development.

In the two decades since I was a college student, the teaching of writing has become more process-oriented. Instead of being left on their own with an assignment, students today learn rules for how to proceed--rules that could have made my student efforts at writing less haphazard. Largely because of the work of cognitive psychologists, words like "strategy," "procedure," "process," and "heuristic" now dominate composition texts. In addition to demonstrating the kind of thought that belongs in the assigned essay, teachers also guide students in producing the essay.

It's surprising that while the teaching of writing has changed substantially, no such transformation has occurred in

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the teaching of literature. Most college literature courses are still taught the way I was taught. For the most part teachers still make a reading assignment at the end of class and expect students in the following class to discuss what they've read or be tested on it. While the focus in writing classes has broadened to include process as well as product, the focus in literature classes is still on the product--that is, on having understood the assignment--with little attention to the process of how the student is to read with understanding.

Since research in writing has transformed for the better our teaching of wrting, it seems logical that research in reading could do the same for teaching literature, especially now that students are coming to college less and less skilled and experienced in reading. Perhaps knowing about reading research would suggest ways to make reading more manageable and productive for students.

One popular line of research over the past twenty years has involved the role of the reader's prior knowledge--that is, the ways in which the knowledge readers bring to a text affects what they take away from it. This article will briefly review what are now considered to be classic studies on that topic and suggest some implications for teachers of literature.

Kenneth Goodman's reference in the late 1960s to "behind-the-eye" information stands as a pivotal point in reading research. Earlier research had concentrated on how

the brain received and absorbed data from the page. The brain was thought to recognize letters, to put letters together into words, to put words together into phrases and then clauses and then sentences. Finally, groups of sentences added up to complete thoughts. The meaning, thus, derived from the sum of the data. Goodman, however, emphasized the importance to comprehension of the information already in the reader's head, and he characterized the activity in the brain as more irregular than a constant amassing of parts into wholes. He writes:

> The reader brings his prior experiences into play in response to the graphic input. (16)
> In silent reading, the reader sweeps ahead sampling from the graphic input, predicting structures, leaping to quick conclusions about the meaning and only slowing down or regressing when subsequent sampling fails to confirm what he expects to find. (19)

In most basic terms, Goodman broadened our view of reading from a data-driven process to one that is also concept-driven, those concepts or expectations growing out of the reader's prior experiences.

Following Goodman's lead, researchers have demonstrated repeatedly that the reader's behind-the-eye information often contributes more to comprehension than do the words on the page. Consider the following sentences, for example:

The punter kicked the ball.

The baby kicked the ball.

The golfer kicked the ball. (Anderson & Shifrin 331).

In our mental representations of these sentences we incorporate extensive extralinguistic knowledge, imagining in each case a different kind of ball, a different kind of kick, a different motive in kicking the ball, and a different setting. Sentences like these suggest how readers, in the process of comprehending, elaborate and embellish the linguistic message.

The images and ideas readers bring to the text, researchers have shown, can transform a small literal difference into a disporportionately large difference in meaning. Take this pair of sentences:

Princess Anne broke the bottle on the ship.

The waitress broke the bottle on the ship.

(Anderson and Pearson 261)

Though the words on the page differ only in the subjects of the sentences--that is, the female performing the action--the world knowledge of readers causes them to know that one female is standing on dry land, the other on the ship; that one is pleased the bottle broke, the other dismayed; that one action is accompanied by much pomp and circumstance while the

other is disrupting the common routine of serving drinks.

Researchers established, then, that the words on the page don't lead to comprehension in and of themselves, but instead they hook into or activate networks of knowledge in the reader's head. Schema theory offered a model for those networks, or schemata, within which the brain stores knowledge. On the basis of schemata accumulated through experience, David Rumelhart has argued, readers constantly hypothesize about meaning and constantly test those hypotheses against the data the text is providing. As they read and more data become available, they refine or specify their theory about the meaning.

Here's an example to illustrate Rumelhart's point. As you read the following passage, stop at each set of slashes and think about the mental hypothesis you've constructed:

> John was on his way to school last Friday. He was really worried about the math lesson. // Last week he'd been unable to control the class. // It was unfair of the math teacher to leave him in charge. // After all, it's not a normal part of a janitor's duties.
>
> (Sanford and Garrod 10)

Notice that not only did you construct a scenario in comprehending each sentence, but also you had to keep changing that scenario for an accurate understanding of the whole.

Failure to comprehend occurs either when readers aren't flexible enough about changing schemata in response to data from the text or when they lack the appropriate schemata to flesh out the data. As for the latter, cognitive psychologists did studies to demonstrate that once a reader possesses information to embellish the words on the page, a previously puzzling text becomes clear. For example, take a sentence like, "The notes were sour because the seams split"(Bransford and McCarrell 222). Even though the grammar is straight-forward and the words simple, for many readers meaning remains elusive. However, if these readers are given the clue, "bagpipes," they experience a click of comprehension. That clue activates in the reader's head information that makes the sentence immediately understandable. Sometimes therefore even when the words and syntax are easy, Anderson comments, a text "is gobbledygook unless the reader possesses an interpretive framework to breathe meaning into it"(1977: 423).

Here's another example of a passage that is difficult to understand when the reader is given no context to activate prior knowledge. Cover up my comments at its end, and experiment with comprehending it. What's it about?

> With hocked gems financing him, our hero bravely defied all scornful laughter that tried to prevent his scheme. "Your eyes deceive. It is like an egg, not a table." Now the three sturdy sisters sought truth, forging

> along, sometimes through calm vastness, yet more often over turbulent peaks and valleys. Days became weeks as many doubters spread fearful rumors about the edge. At last, from nowhere, winged creatures appeared, signifying momentous success. (Dooling and Lachman: adapted from page 217)

Was it difficult to understand? What if the direct quotation had read, "Your eyes deceive. An egg, not a table, correctly typifies this unexplored planet"? Or what if the passage had been preceded by the title, "Christopher Columbus"? When readers are given either language specific enough to suggest the topic or else a title specifying that topic, a set of known information is activated, and suddenly most readers clearly understand what had been a series of evocative but elusive and frustrating words. Dooling and Lachman thus showed that prior knowledge guides readers in their search for concepts to give meaning to the text. Without that knowledge we don't understand the text; with it, we do.

Here's one additional example of a paragraph written so that most people are unable to construct a scenario to explain the situation. See what you understand:

> If the balloons popped the sound wouldn't be able to carry since everything would be too far away from the correct floor. A closed window would also prevent the sound from carrying, since most buildings tend to be

well insulated. Since the whole operation depends upon a steady flow of electricity, a break in the middle of the wire would also cause problems. Of course, the fellow could shout, but the human voice is not loud enough to carry that far. An additional problem is that a string could break on the instrument. Then there could be no accompaniment to the message. It is clear that the best situation would involve less distance. Then there would be fewer potential problems. With face to face contact, the least number of things could go wrong. (Bransford and Johnson 719)

Incomprehensible? The syntax is clear, the vocabulary easy, the objects familiar, concrete, imageable--balloons, electricity, a musical instrument. But if you are like the subjects who were given this passage, you were unable to understand it and would have difficulty remembering it. However, once the subjects were given the picture in Figure 1 (See Appendix A) showing the relationships among the parts, the meaning snapped into focus. In both of these experiments, "a vague, opaquely written passage, which in isolation seemed nonsense and was very poorly recalled, became perfectly sensible and easily recalled when a title or picture preceded it, establishing contact with the subjects' prior knowledge" (Goetz and Armbruster 207). The experiments prove that "what is critical for comprehension is that the reader possess a schema to provides a coherent explanation

for objects and events mentioned in a discourse" (Anderson 1985: 373-375).

For teachers of literature, what are the implications of these findings that a good part of the comprehension process depends on knowledge already in the reader's head? Our traditional way of teaching--read first, then discuss--fit with the traditional view that the reader gradually accumulated meaning from the page. When reading was seen primarily as a data-driven process in which the reader decoded words and deciphered grammatical structures in order to arrive at the meaning, it made sense that a student would succeed in understanding even a difficult text through good American perserverance and hard work.

However, the broadened view of reading as also a concept-driven process implies that teachers need to build or activate students' knowledge of the topic. The read-first-then-discuss approach leaves students struggling, often fruitlessly, to understand (for instance) passages like the ones about Columbus or the balloons. Since comprehending such passages isn't a matter of a gradual build-up, but instead a click or epiphany once the reader knows the concept that makes the words logical and coherent, then as teachers we need to see to it that our students have the necessary concepts or prior knowledge.

The inevitable conclusion here is that even as pre-writing has become regulation fare in composition courses, pre-reading activities should be part and parcel of

literature courses, particularly if the students are poor readers or the texts difficult. Instead of following the old class format of having students read and then discuss, teachers should move some of the discussion to precede the reading. That discussion would enable students to read more proficiently than they do when they approach the text cold.

To carry further the analogy with writing instruction: We teach students to put a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. Especially for beginning writers, their ideas are easier to follow if organized deductively. It takes a good writer to have the skill to proceed inductively. Similarly, the less skilled readers are, the more important the overview is before they start reading. Moreover, research supports this logic. In 1980, Luiten, et al. examined 135 studies of various advance organizers and found that most advance-organizer treatment groups outperformed the control groups.

To accomplish on a larger scale this kind of progression from the whole to the parts instead of the traditional movement from the parts to the whole, the traditional allocation of class time needs to be revamped. That is, instead of making an assignment at the end of the period and then spending the whole of the next class working with what students have attempted to read at home, teachers should spend as much time working with an assignment before students read it as after. So for a 50-minute period, the post-reading discussion would be limited to 25 minutes in order to

use the final 25 minutes of class preparing students for the upcoming assignment.

This practice of familiarizing students with a topic before they read about it has been institutionalized in elementary-school reading programs. It is still uncommon among college instructors probably because such a practice seems elementary-schoolish or high-schoolish. Also, that's not the way most teachers were taught when they were in college, and we tend to teach in the same way we were taught. Most practically, it's more difficult to organize oneself to come to class prepared to deal with two often diverse texts than with just one.

I know well from experience that giving students this prior preparation is harder on the teacher than is the traditional assignment of, Read Act I for tomorrow. With four classes and 100+ students, I'm often lucky to get that day's assignment read. Giving students this type of preparation requires not only that I be on top of the material for that day, but the material for the next day as well. While it's not impossible certainly and it does make preparing that part of the next day's class easier, it is demanding. One way I've tried alleviating the burden on myself is by transferring it to students. Each student is responsible during the semester for doing one preview for the rest of the class. For a sample of the guidelines I distribute, see Appendix B.

Whatever the burden, preparing students to read is worth

the effort. For one thing, pre-reading activities usually attract more student participation than do post-reading activities in that they don't threaten to reveal a student's poor reading skills. For another, students have an immediate reason to pay attention and take notes, since they'll be helped doing their assignment that night. In contrast, unless they're inherently interested in the text, the only reason to take notes on a post-reading discussion is to excel on a distant test or exam.

But the most important reason a teacher should adopt this practice of preparing students to read is that because students will then read with more understanding, class discussion will be on a higher level. When students find the diction and syntax in a reading assignment difficult and unfamiliar, they're in a position similar to that of children learning to read who often are concentrating so hard on simply decoding the words, that they're not aware of what they're reading. Graves, et al. found that "giving students previews frees them at least somewhat from attending to the details of what they are reading and enables them to devote more attention to dealing with higher-level matters such as making inferences"(275).

There are as many ways to prepare students for an assignment as there are ways to deal with it afterwards. Some suggestions follow for increasing the knowledge students will bring to the text:

(1) Make students aware of text structure.

(2) Do some work with vocabulary they'll encounter.

(3) Depending on what may cause confusion, present some information about the action, characters, or setting.

(4) Comment on key words, images, or themes, perhaps discussing their implications or drawing attention to places they occur.

(5) Read aloud to students. Give them a sense of the sound and flow of the language they're going to be reading at home. Let them hear that, given the right intonation, even Milton and Shakespeare can be understandable.

(6) Help students anticipate what will happen in a reading assignment. For instance, ask them to write their own version of something they're going to read. If they're going to read Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, ask them to imagine themselves as an old person and to write down some images they might use to convey to a young person what old age feels like. Ask them to read a title and then to write or talk about what they expect a poem or story with such a title to be about. The same activity can be done in greater depth on the basis of a first paragraph or a first stanza. Read aloud a certain portion of the next assignment or perhaps a summary of it and ask students to write down three or more questions they want their reading to answer. If they're all reading a work at the same pace, at points ask them

to write for ten minutes their own versions of what will happen next; after some students read aloud their endings, others can talk about which ending was the most plausible and why. All of these techniques work to develop in students the habit of holding, as they read, hypotheses that with additional sentences and paragraphs are confirmed or modified.

Any of this type of prior preparation enables students to have a more successful reading experience--by building or activating knowledge they bring to the text, by arousing expectations, by creating a purpose to read beyond just the teacher's saying so, by directing them in what to concentrate on--in general, by making them more actively involved in the reading.

Emerson wrote in "Success," "'Tis the good reader that makes the good book." As teachers of literature, we must more actively address the issue of making our students good readers.

APPENDIX A:

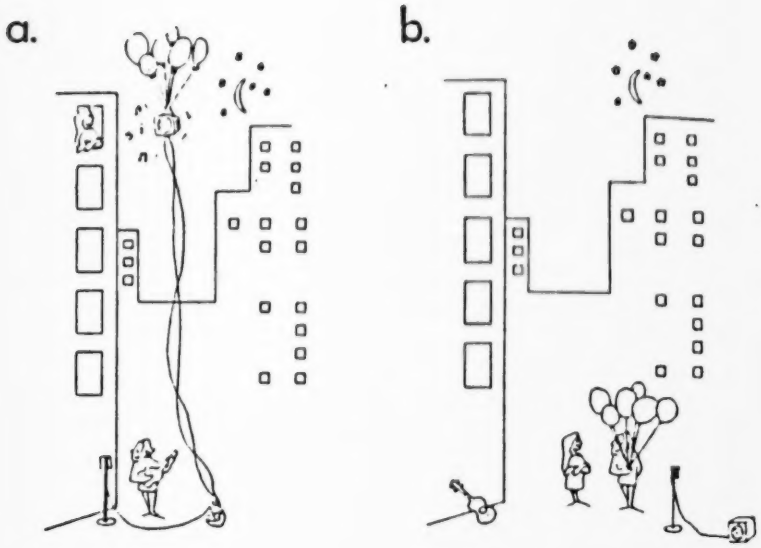

Figure 1. Illustrations from Bransford and Johnson (1972). Version "a" represents the appropriate context and version "b" represents the inappropriate context. See text for accompanying passage.

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Appendix B:

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A PREVIEW

The purpose of your preview is to enable the rest of us to undertake the assignment as informed rather than uninformed readers.

What a preview does:

Gives us some necessary vocabulary. Saves us having to go look up a lot of words.

Gives us a sense of the overall structure of the assignment -- the sections it falls into: different settings, topics, characters, etc.

Alerts us to any pitfalls to comprehension -- that is, places you got lost or confused. You want to give us some specific information or guidelines that might help us avoid similar problems.

Tells us, if there are numerous characters or settings, how to pronounce the names and gives us some material for keeping them all straight.

Comments on key words, images, and/or themes, perhaps drawing our attention to some occurrences of each.

Analyzes one short passage from the assignment. You should read it aloud and then comment on the stylistic and/or thematic characteristics of the passage.

and/or

Does anything else in connection with the assignment that strikes you as interesting, useful, or important.

Handouts, notes on the board, or overhead-projector materials are useful in helping us follow and benefit from what you're telling us. Pictures are nice too.

Please rehearse your preview and limit it to ten minutes. You will give it in the class PRIOR TO the class for which we'll read the assignment and in which we'll discuss it.